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ABSTRACT

To elicit some written comments about student views of revision, an English professor surveyed about 100 students in several different composition classes regarding what they would do if given the opportunity to revise a class paper. More than 80% of the responses explicitly mentioned errors in spelling, mechanics, or grammar. Several students explicitly equated revision with editing. Students who tried to see revision as something more than mere editing met with varying degrees of success. Many students seemed to tie revision closely to teacher requests. In a related study, over 400 students rated the "helpfulness" of a variety of teacher comments. Findings offer additional evidence that students want to do what they think teachers want them to do. Students preferred teacher comments that told them just what to do and how to do it. Students might see revision in hierarchical terms--until they correct the errors pointed out by the teacher, they are not going to worry about trying to improve the content or organization of their ideas. The challenge for teachers is to decide what they really want and then let students know what it is. (Contains a diagram illustrating a hierarchy of needs.) (RS)

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Giving Them What They Want: Student Views of Revision

Before trying to describe student views of revision, let me describe what seems to be a popular teacher's view. Toby Fulweiler's article on "Provocative Revision" in the Spring 1992 issue of *The Writing Center Journal* suggests teaching revision as "limiting," "adding," "switching" and "transforming." In their composition textbook *Inside Out: A Guide to Writing* (Allyn and Bacon, 1993), Maurice Scharton and Janice Neuleib explicitly distinguish between "editing" (to clarify the meaning of a text) and "revising" (to change the meaning of a text); they define "revision" as "the process of adding, deleting, or rearranging significant pieces of text" (179). But for some reason, students—at least the ones I've encountered—seem to have different ideas about revision.

To elicit some written comments about student views of revision, I surveyed about a hundred students in several different composition classes, asking them the following question: "When (or if) you are given the opportunity to revise a class paper, what do you do?" More than 80% of responses I received explicitly mentioned "correcting" the errors, and most of them specifically mentioned errors in spelling, mechanics or grammar. For example, one student wrote, "All I really do is correct the errors the teacher has pointed out. Like, fix comma errors, grammar, and the composition of the paper." This comment gives lip service to "the composition of the paper," but there's no explanation of what that phrase means to that student. Note, too, that this student doesn't correct all the errors, but only the ones pointed out by the teacher. So much for initiative.

Another student explicitly equated revision with editing: "Revision to me means going over a rough draft and editing it. Sometimes changing structure, grammatical errors such as punctuation and spelling." This student mentions "changing structure," but doesn't indicate whether that refers to essay-level changes

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or simply re-wording sentences. A third student made the process sound more involved, but essentially said the same thing: "If I am given the opportunity to revise a paper the steps I take are as follows: I read the teacher comments; correct marked errors; re-read the paper; take it to my tutor to help me with punctuation, run spell check, re-print, re-read." Notice there's no mention of adding, deleting, or changing large sections of text—just an emphasis of "fixing" whatever is "wrong."

A number of students seemed to <u>try</u> to see revision as something more than mere editing, but with varying degrees of success. For example, one compared it to sculpting: "When I go about revising a paper, I take it like a piece of crude rock and try to carve it into a statue or work of art. First I correct all grammatical mistakes. Then I check transitions from ¶ to ¶. Next I recheck all spelling. Finally, I make all corrections suggested by other sources, and I retype it and print it out." Like many student responses, this one begins with an idea that might suggest a mature view of revision, but then quickly shifts to the more conventional talk about correcting grammar, transitions and spelling. (I wonder whether this student thinks that sculptors work by "correcting errors" in the stone.) Another student focused on making the writing "sound right": "First I read through the paper. If anything sounds strange or does not flow smoothly I try to find a way to reword the phrase. If I cannot find a way to rephrase I delete the phrase." This student apparently sees revision as including sentence-level changes and deletions, but there's nothing to suggest that changes above the sentence level are part of the picture.

One of the few students who mentioned "organization" at all had this to say: "Revising a paper consists of making corrections—both grammatically and structurally. When revising, first I make structural corrections, such as sentence structure, sentence variation, coherence, and smoothness with a well organized backbone. After completing this, I make corrections in spelling and punctuation. Then I make a final draft, which is proofread once more and any needed corrections are made, followed by another final draft." This is probably the most sophisticated view of revision I got, but even though it includes references to "structure" and

"backbone," it begins with an emphasis on "making corrections." "Correcting" implies taking something "wrong" and making it "right," not taking something "good" and making it "better." Maybe that's a subtle difference, but I think it's an important one if we want students to move beyond an "Is it right?" mentality.

What teachers want seems to have a decided influence on what students want—at least with respect to what they want from us when we respond to their writing. Like the first student quoted earlier, many students seemed to tie revision closely to teacher requests. Several students indicated a willingness to accept teacher opinions uncritically, or even to sell out to get the grade. For example, one wrote, "When I am given the opportunity to revise I go back and read the paper and make the changes pointed out by the teacher and other necessary changes." Another acknowledged the teacher as expert: "When I revise a paper I read over the comments and use them to my advantage. Since the teacher knows best, I would particularly pay attention to the comments that tell you what to substitute." Still another expressed less confidence in the teacher, but was willing to accept teacherly authority: "When I revise I read the teacher's remarks and do what they say I should do. Sometimes I feel that the way I had it first was fine, but usually the professor is right." A fourth student admitted outright distrust of teacher comments, but a willingness to give in anyway: "When I revise a class paper, I first reread the entire paper again. Then I read the statements my teacher has written on the paper. The next step taken would be to take the advice from a teacher, but if I think I am correct, I still at least reword the sentence. I tell the teacher what he/she wants to hear." So much for student ownership of their own texts.

I ran a related study in which students rated the "helpfulness" of a variety of comments. This study offers additional evidence that students want to do what they think teachers want them to do. In this study, over 400 students rated the "helpfulness" of 10 teacher comments on a sample student essay. Using actual teacher responses to the essay as models, I created two separate sets of comments: one set consisted mainly of one- and two-word comments, most of which were

evaluative in nature (such as "¶'s much too short," "fragment," "unnecessary," "no subject," and "Avoid 'very'"); the other set consisted mainly of complete sentences and questions, with less emphasis on evaluation (such as "Why do you have such short paragraphs?" "This is a fragment," "Try not to use this word in essays," "What's the subject of this verb?" and "On the next draft, avoid empty words like 'very'"). I think the ratings reveal at least a glimpse of "what students want" when teachers respond to their papers. First, I should note (to no one's surprise) that there's no single style that worked for everyone. With a nine-point scale, every response received at least one rating of 1 or 2, and every response received at least one rating of 9. That range says to me that individual students are as idiosyncratic as individual teachers when it comes to deciding what constitutes a "helpful" teacher comment. Still, some patterns appeared that I think are illuminating.

The highest-rated comment on either form was an explanation of a punctuation "rule": "Commas & periods go inside quotation marks." This comment, with a rating of 7.26 on the 9-point scale, tells the students exactly how to correct an error, and explains the principle behind the correction. The lowest-rated comment on either form was a question: "Why do you have such short paragraphs?" With an average rating of only a 4.50, this question implies that short paragraphs are somehow "bad," but it offers no advice on how to improve them.

I think the issue here is specificity. Comparing different phrasings of a given comment, the more specific version was invariably rated as more helpful, though only a few of the differences were statistically significant. For example, "Try not to use this word in essays" (next to three "very's," which were circled) was rated more than a whole point higher ($p<.0005$) than "unnecessary." The first version specifically directs the student to avoid the word in question; the second version doesn't say whether the word is somehow "bad" or simply superfluous. In another case, "¶'s much too short" was rated as more helpful than "Why do you have such short paragraphs?" ($p<.0005$). Again, the first version identifies the specific problem, while the second version, a question, only implies a problem.

The students themselves, when explaining the logic behind their highest and lowest ratings, sounded similar themes. Here are some typical explanations:

Helpful: "They tell exactly what [the student] is doing wrong while also giving hints on what teachers are looking for to count off on."
Unhelpful: "They don't tell why [the student] shouldn't do these things."

Helpful: "Good suggestions for corrections/improvement."
Unhelpful: "Gives no direction."

Helpful: "Because [they] let the writer clearly know what he did wrong and kind of how he needs to correct it."
Unhelpful: "It sort of tells the reader what he did wrong, but tells no reason or how to correct it."

Helpful: "They give advice and show what to do to correct the problems."
Unhelpful: "They do not offer any advice for correcting."

Some students explicitly disliked questions from the teacher. One noted that an unhelpful comment "asks a question and does not tell you how to fix the problem." Another was more blunt: "Whenever you ask me a question most likely I won't know the answer. That's why I made the mistake in the first place."

Some students focused on grades. One said that helpful comments identify "mistakes [that] can kill a good grade." Another identified comments as unhelpful because they "[don't] help the writer's grade any." The student who may have best captured the prevailing attitude toward helpful comments said this about them: "They stated what the teacher wants and why."

In short, these students seemed to prefer teacher comments that told them just what to do and how to do it; these comments also made students fairly

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comfortable that when they made changes, those changes were precisely what the teacher wanted. So it looks as if students want to give us what we want, if only we'll tell them what it is.

The question, then, shifts from "What do students want?" to "What do teachers want?" When I look at my own responding practices and grading practices, I realize that I may be sending conflicting messages to my students about what I want. On the one hand, I try to refrain from appropriating student texts, to create responses that will turn students back into their own thinking, to offer suggestions rather than directions for improving their writing, and to offer movies of my mind. On the other hand, I find myself handing out grading policies that tell students I expect them "to conform to the conventions of standard academic English" if they expect to pass. Even though I try to discuss grammar and mechanics as rhetorical issues, and even though I give them metaphors that equate bad spelling simply with bad form rather than with sin and wickedness, I still demand certain standards of correctness as a minimum requirement for a passing grade—and I think it's appropriate to do so. But I may be telling students that grammatical and mechanical correctness are "basic" needs that must be met, and that "higher level" needs—such as refocusing their essays, rethinking their ideas, reorganizing their structures, or even rewording their sentences or adding or deleting paragraphs or sentences—should be put off until later.

My point is that if we give students hurdles to jump—even legitimate ones—they're going to concentrate on jumping those hurdles successfully before they worry about anything else. Maybe it would be useful to look at different revising strategies in terms similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs[1]. In case you don't recall your introductory psychology classes, Maslow says that we have a hierarchy of needs, and that we must address the lower-order needs before we turn to the higher-order needs. In other words, until we take care of our physiological needs (such as food, shelter and clothing), we can't worry about our safety needs or our esteem needs; only when our basic needs are provided can we begin to think

about "higher" needs such as aesthetic needs and self-actualization. I don't want to push the analogy too far, but I think it's reasonable to suggest that students might see revision in similar, hierarchical terms. Until they take care of problems for which they might fail--that is, until they correct the errors pointed out by the teacher, and maybe other problems they are sure they can correct properly--they aren't going to worry about trying to improve the content or organization of their ideas.

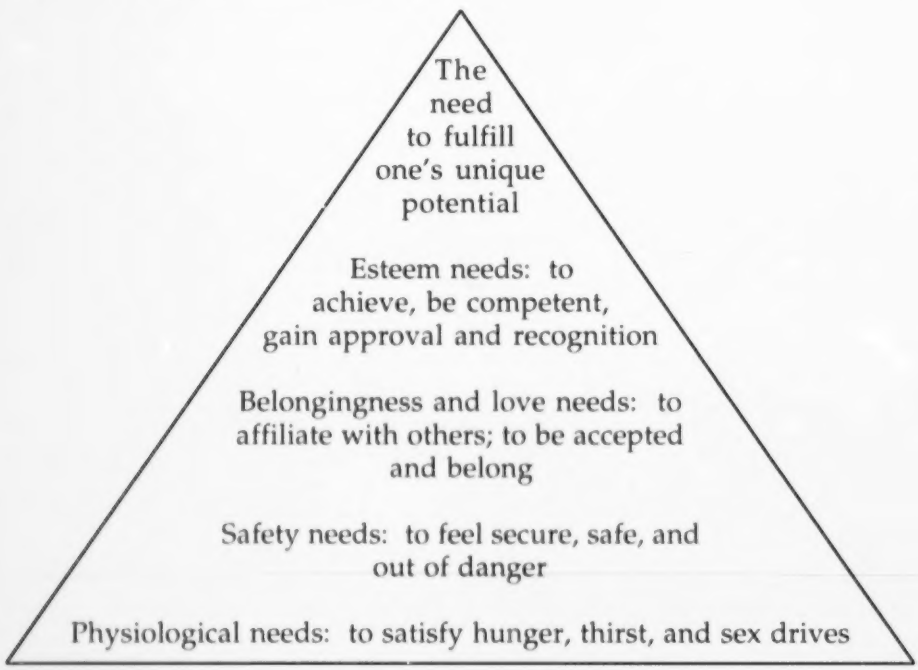
Maybe my demand for a certain "baseline" of conformity to conventions tells students that grammar and mechanics are basic needs—needs that must be addressed before any "higher" needs come into the picture. If that's the case, I shouldn't be surprised that students ignore my carefully constructed questions about their intentions for this or that essay, or that they don't really care about what movies are playing in my mind as I read, and that they settle instead for making whatever corrections I have showed them, while they resist changing anything that I haven't explicitly marked. They're just taking care of first things first. Once the important issues are settled, maybe they'll have time to consider some higher-order forms of revision. Maybe.

Let me stress again that I'm not suggesting that we should always give students what they want. I think our job is to give them what we think they need, whether they want it or not. I do suspect, though, that "what they want" is often closer to "what we want" than we may realize. (They want responses that will help them get better grades. We want responses that will help them become better writers--which in turn will result in better grades. So we really have the same goal, even if our motivations are different.) The challenge for me, then, is to decide what I really want, then to let students know whatever it is. If, when I assign multiple drafts of an essay, I really want them to focus on their ideas and their organizational patterns rather than on spelling, then I need to comment on their ideas and their organizational patterns rather than on their spelling, and I need to reward them when they respond with revision strategies that I deem appropriate. How many

drafts will I require, how many drafts will I read, and at what point do I want to respond to which issues? I'm still not sure. But until I am, and I start communicating that information accurately to my students, I shouldn't be surprised or upset to find those students equating "editing" with "revision." After all, they're only trying to give me what they think I want.

Note

1. Following is a diagram of Maslow's hierarchy, adapted from Wortman, C. and E. Loftus, *Psychology*, (New York: Knofp, 1981):


The need to fulfill one's unique potential
Esteem needs: to achieve, be competent, gain approval and recognition
Belongingness and love needs: to affiliate with others; to be accepted and belong
Safety needs: to feel secure, safe, and out of danger
Physiological needs: to satisfy hunger, thirst, and sex drives